

Baucus, Rehberg join president for signing of CHIP expansion bill

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 02/05/09

With bill-author U.S. Sen. Max Baucus by his side, President Barack Obama Wednesday signed into law an expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, which will provide funds to cover up to 30,000 uninsured Montana kids with the government-funded plan.

Baucus, D-Mont., was the lead sponsor of the bill that passed the U.S. House Wednesday morning and proceeded directly to Obama's desk to become the second bill he has signed into law as president.

"It took a lot of hard work, but we got it done," Baucus said after the signing. "We've done right by kids in Montana and across the country.

"These are families, often single-parent families, often unemployed or who have hard times keeping their jobs. Their kids need health care."

Baucus began working nearly two years ago on the CHIP expansion, which was vetoed twice by then-President George W. Bush in 2007. Attempts to override the veto failed.

With Obama installed as president, congressional Democrats quickly prepared a bill that will increase spending on CHIP by \$32.8 billion over the next five years, enough to add 4 million children to the program.

CHIP already covers about 6.7 million kids nationwide from low- and moderate-income families, including about 17,300 in Montana.

U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg of Montana, one of the few House Republicans to vote for the measure Wednesday, also attended the signing ceremony at the invitation of the president.

"The president came down and talked to me afterwards, and I just told him, 'This isn't a red-state issue or a blue-state issue; this is a Montana kid issue for me,'" Rehberg said. "This is talking about health care for kids."

The other member of Montana's congressional delegation, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., also voted for the measure.

Baucus stood directly behind Obama at the bill-signing ceremony in the East Room of the White House, joining a group of other senators and members of Congress instrumental in the bill's passage.

Reauthorizing and expanding federal CHIP funding through 2013 also paves the way for Montana to go forward with its own expansion of the program, as directed by a ballot measure approved by voters last November.

Initiative 155 expanded the eligibility for CHIP and Medicaid, another state-federal program that provides medical coverage for the poor, with the aim of providing health insurance to as many as 30,000 uninsured children in the state.

The Montana Legislature must approve the state's share of funding for the program and the Schweitzer administration also must design the expansion to comply with various federal rules.

Anna Whiting Sorrell, director of the state Department of Public Health and Human Services, said Wednesday that the signing of the federal bill is "great news for Montana children."

"In addition, the now-approved federal funding is a big hurdle to the Healthy Montana Kids initiative becoming a reality," she said, referring to I-155.

Baucus said he hopes states will take advantage of the expanded federal funding and start adding new kids to

the plan “as soon as possible.”

In Montana, those eligible for CHIP coverage are families whose annual income is at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. That’s about \$45,800 for a family of three and \$36,500 for a family of two.

While CHIP is an expansion of government-funded health insurance, Baucus said further efforts at expanding coverage for Americans will focus on both private and public health insurance.

“This is a down-payment on working toward health-care reform, which includes both public and private coverage,” said Baucus, who expects to be one of the congressional leaders on the issue. “The goal is for all Americans to have health insurance.”